

23. Denis Goldberg: Inspirer, Partner and Friend

By Wolfgang Ebert

Writing this contribution to honour Denis Goldberg on the occasion of his 80th birthday, my thoughts go back to the unusual circumstances in which I was able to get to know South Africa a year after the first universal, equal and secret elections. This week long visit would trigger off impulses lasting till today as regards both my private and my professional life. It also pointed the way to what has become ten years of collaboration with Denis Goldberg, which, not least, led to us becoming friends.

I was given the opportunity to travel to South Africa in spring 1995 through a contact with the then Wuppertal SPD MP and former parliamentary state secretary Rudolf Dressler. A member of a small delegation of experts in social issues and the labour market who were to take part in a congress of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation near Johannesburg was taken ill. I was happy to accept the offer of standing in for a sick colleague at short notice.

During our stay we held many discussions with members of the ANC, church representatives, members of the government and high-ranking employees from the ministries. We received concentrated and comprehensive information about the current situation of the country and its people. Many questions arose for us: how could a successful transformation be accomplished from centuries of colonialism, segregation and Apartheid to a democratic society, characterized by freedom, equality and human dignity? In the democracy which was newly constituting itself, how was the welfare system to be created and developed – care of the elderly, health insurance, unemployment insurance? What state initiatives for the necessary construction of

homes were conceivable? What role could cooperative models play in the housing and economic sectors?

How would the new government deal with the crimes of the Apartheid regime? How would the relationship develop between those who had been responsible for decades of violations of human rights and those who had suffered under them? And not least: on what basis and with what aims would the future South African constitution be worked out?

The great intensity of the discussions, the passion of those taking part, and the force of the arguments employed and the high level of expertise of our partners in discussion impressed me deeply. During our visit, the unequal health provision exemplified in the Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto and the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town showed us the dramatic effects of the Apartheid period, with the scandalous inequality between a badly treated black majority population and a white minority privileged in every area of life.

Doctors and representatives of the care staff told us about the day-to-day activity in the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital – with more than 3,000 beds, partially housed in low buildings like barracks; wards with 60 to 80 patients; departments in which the minimal equipment for medical care – instruments for measuring blood pressure, stethoscopes, ophthalmoscopes – was only available in small numbers; an AIDS ward with ever growing patient numbers. And ultimately it is the only place of hope for sick or injured black people who live in Soweto with its roughly four million inhabitants. A flight of two hours away is the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, which became famous in 1967 for the world's first heart transplant operation by the South African cardiac surgeon Christiaan Barnard. There we experienced central European standards: wide corridors with walls decorated with pictures by South African artists, one- and two-bed rooms. For medical care, ultra-modern technology, trained personnel and up-to-date equipment stood ready. This is only one example of the unequal living conditions and opportunities in Apartheid society.

As the regional manager and head of education of the adult education foundation 'Arbeit und Leben' [Work and Life], which was supported by the DGB [TUC] and adult education centre, I had already been involved with South Africa, and in the seventies and

eighties had participated in campaigns against Apartheid. The direct and moving experiences on the spot and deep shame over the inhumane policy of the white regime led to the decision to make South Africa a theme of our political and adult education to a greater extent. Besides the reappraisal of South African history, the current development of the country seemed to me to offer a wealth of starting points for educational work: apart from the questions I have already mentioned, the discussion of the future organisation of the economy, the country-wide construction of an infrastructure for the black population, the creation of living space, work and educational opportunities for the young generation. In addition, the recognition that racism and violations of human rights also play an increasing role in the society of the FRG.

Between 1997 and 1999 the Berg Mark regional office of Arbeit und Leben, based in Wuppertal, organized two study visits to South Africa, which would facilitate an examination of the period of Apartheid and its results, and on the other hand impart insights into the ethnic, cultural and natural diversity of the country. The participants had conversations with representatives of the ANC, MPs and church people, visited townships and projects of NGOs, and informed themselves about the medical treatment in the Chris Hani Hospital in Soweto. This left behind such concrete and lasting impressions that in 1999 we founded a supporters' association with the purpose of making a contribution to the improvement of medical care in children's orthopaedics in the hospital.

It was another three years before we were made aware through a leaflet from EXILE Culture Coordination that Denis Goldberg, a close companion and comrade-in-arms of Nelson Mandela, was on a reading tour to report on his experiences in the South African struggle for human rights and democracy. Despite the obviously huge demand for appointments with him, we succeeded at short notice in inviting Denis to a meeting at the Wuppertal Adult Education Centre. In front of a relatively small circle of members of our supporters' association, Denis Goldberg first read from the biographical account of Nelson Mandela before speaking about the current development of South African society. Even today I can feel my unpleasant sensation over the fact that because of the short notice, only about twenty interested people had come. I thought that our visitor would get the impression

that the meeting was poorly prepared and that we therefore undervalued his visit? Very quickly, however, it became clear to me that these questions evidently played no role for our guest. Denis turned with great attention and interest to each participant in discussion and answered questions very comprehensively.

Already at our first meeting I felt that our visitor fundamentally communicated respectfully and with sustained interest in other people, their questions and their convictions. Very quickly we were on to the themes of our association's work. In the first years we had had to learn that the spontaneous desire to help which arises from the outsider's view of problems on the spot does not necessarily lead to the desired results. At first we had thought we would be able to help with material aid, from blood pressure measuring instruments to hospital beds and X ray machines which had been taken out of service in Germany. But we quickly realised that the transport costs for such material aid would eat up large sums from the financial donations received. In addition, reports about the internal conditions of the hospital gave us concerns. Donations would not necessarily go to the departments we had intended but into a general 'pot' for the hospital. There was also talk of cases of corruption and theft, according to our research. These were questions which we could only discuss with a man who could assess the situation on the spot far better than members of a small association in Germany acting on a voluntary basis. Denis answered our questions very patiently. Perhaps even more important was his offer to collect further information on the situation at the Baragwanath Hospital on his return to South Africa and send it to us.

Without this first meeting with Denis Goldberg, without his unconditional willingness to support our activities, at best like a jigsaw, our association would definitely have been less successful. Very soon the first news from Denis reached us. The results of contacts with responsible people at the hospital and with colleagues from the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the various newspaper cuttings which reported on problems in the administration of the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, were depressing. After intensive discussions in the supporters' association we decided that because of the uncertain development of the hospital and the unclear

structures, further financial support could not be answered for to the donors.

The prime aim of the association, to guarantee a contribution to the health provision of children and young people in small projects, was now extended to the areas of education and training. So we hoped to find suitable projects to support on a long-term basis via the contact with Denis. This hope was not disappointed. Soon after our inquiry an e-mail reached us in which Denis introduced us to the E.R.I.C. Project in southern KwaZulu-Natal – an ‘Education, Resource and Information Centre’. He described in detail the aims of the project: equipment of the schools in the region with teaching and learning resources; construction of a library for the use of pupils and teachers; equipment of a computer room; and in the medium term, building an orphanage for children from families affected by HIV. Denis also informed us about the initiators of the project, Olive Goll and Mike Peacock, and the circumstances of the lives of the children and young people involved. Through this the members of the association received such a comprehensive picture that they came to a positive decision. A long, laborious period of research and search for contacts and reliable ways to transfer our assistance was over.

With Denis’s help the association had succeeded in finding a new goal and as a result new impetus for its further work. In the following years we were to get to know further projects with Denis’s support. The Ububele project in Alexandra township, in which besides psychotherapeutic work with traumatised children, lay and local authority advisers are trained, as well as the project of the Kronendal Music Academy in Denis’s home town of Hout Bay, became partners of the supporters’ association. Direct experiences on the spot in conversations and viewings again formed the basis for more extensive information to the members of the Baragwanath Soweto Association. The meetings with Tony Hamburger and his wife Hillary, people who had played an important role for Denis during his imprisonment, were very vital.

In the context of the FRG-wide campaign, ‘Your Day for Africa’, in summer 2012, the sixth class of a Wuppertal comprehensive school participated in their education authority area with many activities. A special experience for the pupils, but also for the parents and teachers, of Barmen Comprehensive School was the performance of the jazz

group of the Kronendal Music Academy under the conductorship of Dwyn Griesel. On the one hand it was an important element in promoting the cultural exchange between South Africa and Germany, but at the same time also a record of the lasting integration work of this unusual music school.

Beyond the collaboration between Denis and the Wuppertal Supporters' Association, over the years there were many different lecture events in the region as part of the educational work of the Wuppertal office of Arbeit und Leben. Dates for Denis's lectures and readings in schools and adult education institutes, or in bookshops, were and still are hotly sought and often eagerly awaited by many. News spread by word of mouth led to ever more inquiries from interested institutions and disseminators of information.

Anyone who has experience of what it is like to work in German schools knows how hard it is to interest children and young people throughout a lesson. Readings with Denis, rarely with an audience of fewer than 100 pupils, present a different picture, regardless of type of school or age of pupil. "You could hear a pin drop for one and a half hours," is the reaction of almost every colleague. Denis can adapt his language and level of abstraction excellently to the age of his audience. In answer to the question as to how he succeeds in holding the attention of his listeners over a longer period, he once said roughly this, "I can see in my listeners' eyes if there's anybody at home." If there is loss of concentration, to enlarge on this point, he tells little anecdotes to establish direct connections to the day-to-day situation of the listeners, makes them laugh with humorous asides, or modulates his voice so skilfully that absentees are quickly 'brought back home.' To be taken seriously and treated with respect are experiences which people can have again and again in dealings with Denis.

"There are no stupid questions, only stupid answers" is his encouragement, especially at meetings with a younger public. The natural way in which Denis thanks his listeners for the questions that have been asked, his honest, and in particular cases also politically explosive, opinions allow his audience to feel that a person with firm basic convictions stands before them, who is an example authentically and in his commitment and modesty. His remarks on developments in Federal German society arouse concern and thought. As Denis says in his lectures, racist tendencies and inhumane actions are again and

again disrupting the multicultural collaboration, characterised by freedom and tolerance, which has been successful in many fields. This is true on a national level, but also internationally: “Anyone who has not closed his eyes to the injustices which still torment millions knows that there is still a long way to go.”

The many positive report backs after readings and talks and the request that Denis be invited again have also given the work of the regional office new impetus and stimulus.

We have asked ourselves again and again: how can we also make the history of South Africa and the importance of the struggle for freedom accessible to young people outside of Denis Goldberg’s readings? With this in mind, in 2009 we began a project entitled ‘South Africa before the football World Cup’ with the Hohenstein Secondary School in Wuppertal-Barmen. In a team from the seventh and eighth classes, pupils prepared an exhibition; starting from the sports venues with their new stadia, the pupils put together, for example, information about the history of South Africa, the period of Apartheid, the struggle of the ANC, and culture and education. The pupils had also asked four South Africans – Tony Hamburger, Denis Goldberg, Mandla Mthembu and Silke Fabbe (leaders at our study seminars) – for their assessment of the future development of their country. Their views formed the conclusion of the little exhibition. At the same time, pupils of the sixth class made music instruments out of waste materials in their music lessons. At the end of both projects, the results were presented in a joint event, some of the musical instruments auctioned, and the proceeds donated to the Ububele Project.

Recently Denis Goldberg’s visit to the Blüchestraße Secondary School in Wuppertal’s Vohwinkel suburb, a school with many children from immigrant families which had been repeatedly targeted by attacks from neo-Nazi youths had a particular importance. “The reading,” according to a teacher at the school, “was an important contribution to strengthening our pupils’ self-confidence and their commitment to peaceful and tolerant coexistence.”

In recognition of Denis’s particular involvement in Bergisch Land the towns of Remscheid and Wuppertal decided to honour him with an entry in the towns’ Golden Books. In June 2007 the Mayor of Wuppertal, Peter Jung, honoured his commitment to democracy and

human rights. The readings to schools, and institutions of out-of-school youth work and adult education, were exemplary. It was a festive occasion which pleased not only Denis but everybody who had been able to work with him over many years.

I and my family, my wife Gabriela and our daughter Christina, have been hosts to Denis many times. He stayed in our grown-up daughter's former room in the basement flat. However, this could only be reached by way of a not unproblematic 'space saving staircase,' which Denis uncomplainingly put up with. Unfortunately, we had forgotten to prepare him for a shower which only dripped when showers on other floors were in use at the same time. After the first night, Denis came to breakfast. We greeted each other in friendly fashion and then he asked with a little smile, "Wolfgang, is there a secret to your shower?" We both experienced situations like that again and again, where something didn't work: telephone connections to South Africa not operating, short notice changes to the order of the day, unplanned detours. Denis accepted these situations cheerfully and with often astonishing adaptability.

His anecdotes and stories during our evening conversations, to which we occasionally invited friends from our supporters' association and from political life, deserve a separate publication. Despite his hard life and bitter experiences, both political and private, it always impressed us how much positive energy, how much enthusiasm and how much courage to face life emanate from his person.

I remember an evening in November 2003. Instead of the South African summer with pleasantly warm temperatures, in Bergisch Land there were days of fog, cold and wet. Denis had contracted a massive cold, and the medicine cabinet was brought into action, at first without effect. Bronchitis tormented him and I suggested that he should cancel the evening engagement. With his agreement I would arrange for a postponement; he should be in bed. Denis looked at me and only said briefly, "Wolfgang, when I'm on the stage, the adrenalin comes." It was pointless to argue; we drove to the Elberfeld town centre and a well filled meeting thanked a lively and impressive contemporary witness.

Love of nature, of the dense woods of the Bergisch Land and the varied landscape, prompted him to spontaneously react on a journey to

neighbouring Solingen with, “This countryside here reminds me of the area around Cape Town.” However much of a local patriot I am, I still think this shows a (mild) exaggeration, but it showed me, as in many other situations, that Denis attaches importance to seemingly small things and can enjoy them. When we came home after meetings and he was asked if he wanted anything, often after being repeatedly asked the answer would come, “Gaby could you make me a little tea?” The ‘little tea’ has now entered the family’s regular usage, linked to many good memories of Denis’s visits to Wuppertal.

We were able, to our great joy, to share special moments in our friend’s life. It was lovely to be able to attend his 75th birthday celebration in Essen and to see contacts again, to exchange experiences with them and talk about new projects.

2010 soon brought two highlights: in Munich I was able to be at the premiere of the film ‘Comrade Goldberg’, and we were also at the presentation of the German edition of his autobiographical book *The Mission* in the South African Embassy in Berlin. We were very happy that this book came on the market, because for many years we were not certain whether Denis would put his life experiences and thoughts down on paper. A task, as we knew which would involve great expenditure of energy and revive painful memories. One more reason to say thank you. Thank you to Denis that he gave himself the trouble, but also to those who supported him in this work. With the accompanying DVD, important materials have also been made available for the political education of young people and adults.

I would not like to end my contribution, Denis, without heartily congratulating you on your birthday and wishing you all the best from the heart, along with Gaby and Christina, the members of the Baragwanath Soweto Supporters’ Association, but of course also in the name of everyone in our region who has been able to get to know you! Good health and hopefully many more years with good experiences and dear people round you!

In addition, my thanks go to the colleagues of the EXILE Culture Coordination, who have enabled many meetings with Denis to happen through their work and involvement. It has been great working with you.

Wolfgang Ebert for 26 years the CEO of the Regional Office of Arbeit und Leben (Work and Life). He is responsible for close contact with civil society groups, civil society organizations and the youth. He was a founder of the Wuppertal Support Group for Baragwanath – Soweto organization, a registered NGO of which he is the Chairperson.

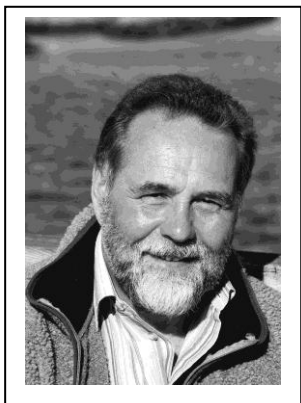


Foto: Gabi Ebert